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MU LSC5555

Assignment 4\_1: Observing a kid search

I observed my neighbor for this task, a 7th grade, 12-year-old girl. Her research involved the question “Why did people move to the back country during colonial times?” She already knew that a lot of the backcountry people came from the borders of Scotland and Ireland, moving to America because of religious prosecution and drought. They moved to the backcountry specifically because they were asked by others to defend the western frontier from the Native Americans, Spanish or French. This was because of their survival skills. She also added that many were from Pennsylvania because it was the first to offer religious freedom, then religious freedom spread to the other colonies. Her homework was to search and find one new fact about this topic.

Google is her preferred search engine. When asked about her word selection for the search box, she wasn’t really sure how she decides. She said, “Maybe it's just like type in exactly what the teacher tells us to do.” I asked for clarification and she answered that “She doesn't tell us what to type,” and we settled on her using key words that the teacher says. She described using suggestions in instant search, especially because of spelling issues. However, I didn't witness her using suggestions during this search. Her search strategy is to look at the first page as much as possible because the pages after don't seem to hold as much information, and get more general or broad in topic. If nothing good comes up, she told me “you have to change your wording sometimes, making it shorter.” She has tried advanced search in the past, but not very often. She admitted it’s quicker to use the toolbar and that sometimes advanced search narrows it down too much, ex. talks about one region of the back country instead of the whole back country.

To begin her search she typed in “Why did people move to backcountry?” One of the first sites on the list was wiki.answers and she said “I try not to use Wikipedia too often because it's from people and not always reliable.” She then found a page from her textbook on the first site she clicked on and backed out. She then clicked on a site entitled “Living in the backcountry,” indicating it was kind of useful because it had vocabulary and key concepts, but was too narrow. She had trouble on one site because she couldn't open a pdf file. She double clicked to open it and the computer wanted to save it. She didn't notice the message at the bottom of the screen until I pointed it out; she just kept clicking. I deduced that she wasn't reading the fine details, then I pointed out a quick view link next to the description and it opened.

During her search I heard a lot of “hmms,” indicating some frustration or confusion. She also had a look of concentration and was leaning toward the screen. After several more “hmms,” she tried another search: “Why did scots-irish move to the backcountry?” She wanted to be more specific. She also informed me that she looks at the descriptions when deciding which sites to click on and sometimes looks at site addresses for .edu or .org, because she feels they are better than .com sites. She explained how .com is usually a person's website so it’s not as educational. Furthermore, she used the arrow on the right of the description to see previews of sites. At one point she was surprised that one site "didn't have any of the words I put in (in description), but it was actually a really good source." I assume she’s never had a lesson on how search works. She then added that “if the site has a weird name, sometimes it just messes you up.” And that she tries to check all sites on the front and second page, unless it's clearly not about what she's looking for. She checks the preview arrow anyways. When asked, she responds that she sometimes finds information within sites to change her search, but usually finds enough information on the first page.

I asked her if she had been taught how to search. She responded that last year, her librarian focused on a particular search engine, how to use the advanced search box in Google and the preview arrows. She was also taught to pay attention to the site being .com, .edu or .org. Moreover she learned how to cite sources and scan pages first - reading headings and captions to determine if it’s a good source. She shared that a lot of her friends just use Wikipedia because it's really quick and convenient. But she tries to avoid it; I think so she doesn't have to worry so much about the validity of the information. The librarian tried to show kids how to look at sources, etc. to determine reliability. The student I observed said she doesn't really do that, but realizes she needs to do it more often.

I was surprised at how much she was into this task and her willingness to share with me and her eagerness to offer up additional information on fellow students, etc. that I didn't ask about. We had 25 minutes, but it went by too fast. I could tell she was a little bit frustrated with her search and I knew that she would feel much better about it and would have searched much quicker and more efficiently, and more in depth (something she avoids) if she was taught search skills. My observation highlights the need for lessons on searching for all students and that the lessons must be built upon, continuing every year in school. It strengthens my resolve to teach search skills to my students at the beginning of each year when I return to the classroom. It's also important to teach kids how to evaluate a website, but then make sure they are practicing what they have learned. So I will have them fill out forms evaluating a website once in a while to get them in the practice of doing it. Once they're comfortable, the hope is that they will evaluate websites automatically, without paperwork to fill in. I enjoyed my time observing and listening to my neighbor describe her history with search. I feel it was a worthwhile task.